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Defend Liberty in the Church

by Graeme Brooks





GUIDE 1.0

**GRAEME
BROOKS**

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INTRODUCTION

Modern Christians are often the staunchest defenders of the state. They raise flags in their temples, they fall over each other to support the troops, and they thank God in their nightly prayers for giving them such benevolent masters. If you are reading this guide then you probably find that odd, frustrating, or both. Why is the church of the Prince of Peace so pro-war? Why are followers of history's most notable enemy of the state so pro-government? How can those who regularly read the Bible openly claim to serve two masters, when scripture tells us it is impossible?

You are neither insane nor alone in asking these questions. The Christian church (by which I mean a community, not a



building) can and should be a bastion of liberty, embodying the radical message of liberty in the Gospel. Its capacity to operate as a counterculture in opposition to tyranny has been proven time and again throughout history, from first-century Rome to modern-day China. Our local church communities can be the same if we can communicate our message clearly and biblically.

*The biblical teaching is clear.
It always contests political power.*

— Jacques Ellul

This guide is written primarily as a handbook for lay Christians. The first half discusses when and how to talk about liberty within your church community, as well as practical ways to “live liberty” in the church. The second half tackles a number of key passages of scripture that deal with the Christian’s relationship to the state. Some of these passages are often misread in such a way that they seem to endorse the state. I will offer alternative readings of these commonly misused passages, and also highlight other passages of the Bible that clearly condemn the state.

If you are not a Christian, this guide may be helpful to you, too, in challenging friends or family members of faith. Indeed,



as most Christians would probably leap at the opportunity to discuss the Bible with a nonbeliever, you may have a better chance than those of us within the community of actually getting them to sit down and discuss liberty with you.

WHEN AND HOW TO DISAGREE

If you are a non-Christian, there are some simple guidelines to follow. First, appreciate that any Christian you discuss this with is likely to know the Bible better than you, so approach any textual discussion with humility and an attitude of learning, not defiance. Second, approach the discussion with empathy; try to understand and respect the other person's strong emotional attachment to the beliefs being discussed. Third, while this may sound cynical, try to play on the "social capital" you have brought to the discussion. Your Christian friend will no doubt use any discussion of scripture as an opportunity to change your mind on matters of faith, so they will be hoping for open-mindedness on your part. If they do not show open-mindedness to your message of liberty in return, do not be afraid to gently point out their double standard.

If you are a Christian, the guidelines for you are not entirely dissimilar. Humility, empathy, and discernment will be important in selecting the most appropriate times and ways in which to raise the topic. However, where non-Christians are most likely to engage on a one-to-one basis with people they know well, you are trying to promote your ideas within a community. I will cover some general guidelines below, but I should note here that opportunities will vary greatly between different denominations and communities.

SERVICE

The best way to engage in constructive conversation is through serving. By serving alongside someone, you will develop a bond that is hard to replicate in any other way; respectful conversations will follow naturally. Although this may seem like obvious advice to some churchgoers, many liberty-minded folks find themselves on the fringe of their community due to differences of opinion and lifestyle. Avoid this, both for the sake of communicating liberty and for your own spiritual and



emotional health. The more you serve, the less people will be able to ostracise you due to differences of opinion, and the more weight your words will carry when the opportunity to talk about liberty arises. Youth work is one field of service where you may have particularly fruitful opportunities to discuss liberty, and there are other ideas for serving in the Ways to Witness section below.

PREACHING

Perhaps the most obvious method for spreading a message within a congregation is by preaching. Fortunately, many churches welcome contributions by lay preachers. I would caution restraint, however, in how you make use of such opportunities. You should be careful to ensure that your sermon is clearly founded on biblical passages and is aimed at spiritual perspectives or attitudes, rather than specific political principles or situations. For example, it is better to question what obedience to God means, and thereby promote an apolitical standpoint, than it is to openly attack the idolatry of Republican statism. It is better to discuss the fate of Israel under various kings than to criticize the latest president or prime minister. It is better to discuss the day-to-day implications of the Sermon on the Mount than to directly address gun ownership or the outlawing of vices. Remember that for all its merits, preaching does not allow dialogue, so if you push the audience too far they will simply tune out — or worse.

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STUDY GROUPS

Bible study sessions are a much more appropriate medium for really getting into the difficulties of interpreting the scriptures. Such sessions are more “optional” than the weekly sermon, they allow interest groups to form, they are more relationship-based, and they allow a proper discourse. This setting also allows you to approach things more gradually. For example, you could look at the fate of Israel under different regimes (Egypt, the judges, the kings, and Rome) in separate sessions, then ask the group to look back and see what they think they can learn about the relationship between the kingdom of God and secular power.



EMOTION

Emotion is important, even essential, in communicating your principles, so do not be afraid to show it. Too often in the western world we approach both faith and politics as rationally as we can, and thereby lose a crucial dimension of both. Do not mistake the need for humility, gentleness, and joy to mean that you cannot feel indignation, anger, and grief at the state of the world. What you must work towards, and pray for, is the ability to express these emotions in a way such that people can share them with you instead of feeling like the target of your emotions. Your free-market principles will mean more when you weep for the impact of economic interventionism on the poor. Similarly, your antiwar principles will mean more when you rage at the arms industry. Make sure neither of these emotions seems directly pointed at the Christian beside you, who may have supported both economic interventionism and militarism.

RESPECT FOR AUTHORITY

Finally, I would encourage you, above all, to be respectful of the authorities within your church community. Whether your church is led by a paid clergyman or volunteer or elected elders, you must bring them with you on the journey towards liberty. The church has enough schisms, so do not preach without letting them know your message, or run Bible studies with which they are uncomfortable. If, after you treat them with grace and patience, they refuse to allow you to teach in any way, then either content yourself with serving, as outlined above, or politely take your leave and find a more suitable community.

Be respectful of the authorities within your church community.

WAYS TO WITNESS

The best way to open a dialogue is not simply to talk about a principle, but to act on it and see who asks questions. Just as we are called to “witness” for our faith by acting with grace, so must we witness for liberty. The following list is far from exhaustive, but offers some starting points on how to go about this.



- **“Faith and community” marriage:** If you are getting married, consider having a “faith and community” wedding, in which you are married in the sight of your God and your community but not the state. This will mean not seeking registration, not receiving a marriage certificate, and changing your vows slightly. This is a great way to make a statement to your church community and everyone who attends the ceremony. (Be sure to check local laws and see how this might impact you in terms of tax and other practical issues before making a decision, however.) If people ask you why you are doing it, ask them who can truly bless a union between two people: God or the state.



- **Homeschooling:** Let your church see what children raised on the principles of liberty look like (generally more intelligent, more confident, more polite, and with a healthier attitude towards authority and learning). If people ask why you do it, ask them how they feel about the secularization of their children’s education.

Let your church see what children raised on the principles of liberty look like.

- **Pray through election day:** Invite the members of your church to a home or venue where you will pray on election day, but make it clear this is as an alternative to voting. Set up prayer stations around the room that might challenge pro-state attitudes, for example, prayers for the victims of Western wars, for illegal immigrants, or for those in prison for drug use. If people ask you why you are doing this, ask them which they think is more effective for change: voting or praying.
- **Feed or house the homeless:** Find out what zoning laws at your church allow in terms of overnight shelter, or start feeding the homeless in public. Note there are many local laws banning feeding or sheltering the homeless in certain locations, and make your decision as to how to witness. Many liberty-minded Christians have chosen to defy these laws, but be aware of the potential consequences.



- **Street pastoring:** Instead of calling the police when drunks or drug users revel too close to your home or church, go out and care for them yourself. This takes training and dedication to do safely and effectively, but is both a good Christian witness and a way to deny the police a chance to lock up vulnerable people. If people ask you why you don't report the drug abusers you will almost certainly come across, ask them who heals more lives: God or the local judge.



- **The white poppy:** In Britain and some other countries, red poppies are worn on days of remembrance for soldiers. Some, however, wear white poppies to show that they remember all of war's victims, and wish for an end to all wars. Although you will need to find something appropriate to your local customs, I would encourage you to find a non-confrontational way to subvert memorial and remembrance celebrations to create a strong antiwar message.

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- **Save the Storks:** Direct action that sidesteps the state is great, and there are a multitude of options available to Christian communities. Save the Storks is a great example: it is an organization which, instead of lobbying for changes to abortion law, simply offers free sonograms at vans parked outside abortion clinics. Without any sort of pressure or campaigning, their service has helped thousands of mothers to make an informed choice for life, within yards of the clinic door. Find your own way to get your community engaged in sidestepping the state.

INTRACTABLE COMMUNITIES AND FREE ALTERNATIVES

Given enough time and patience, some of you will find success using the methods above, and your community may start to look more like a Jesus counterculture than a flag bearer of empire. However, this will not be everybody's experience. Your views, as they become clearer to your community, may be seen as a challenge to established leaders or traditions and therefore be received with hostility. Or you may simply be met with apathy or condescension instead of understanding or action. If this is the case, you may quickly start to wonder whether you are in the wrong community and whether you should find another one.

This is a natural place in which to find yourself as a radical, so take heart. I cannot provide concrete advice, as it will depend not only on your community but also on how well you can handle yourself in such a situation. There is, however, an alternative for those who find themselves in a dark place: the home church movement. This is a movement away from traditional churches, with their buildings and salaries and enormous congregations, and towards smaller, more natural communities. Aimed at emulating the communities that made up the early Christian church, such communities are significantly more liberty-minded in their makeup, with flat hierarchies and more member participation. However, they also have their flaws, including a reduced reach and more limited spiritual oversight. Ultimately, you will have to make a prayerful decision as to whether to stay and witness to your traditional community or branch out and found a new one with like-minded individuals.



LIBERTY IN THE BIBLE: THE FIVE MOST IMPORTANT PASSAGES

If you do manage to open a discussion with Christians on what their attitude towards the state should be, sooner or later the discussion will rightly turn to the Bible. There are a handful of passages that are commonly cited as being in favor of Christian obedience to, and engagement with, the modern state. The first two sections below will give you an outline of a response to some of these commonly cited passages, showing how and why they have been misunderstood. The other sections analyze passages that you could raise in response, showing that in fact scripture paints human governments in a very negative light. To make the most of the arguments below, you should:



- **Bookmark the passages in your Bible or on your smartphone or tablet so they are ready if the topic ever comes up.**
- **Read them carefully and keep notes.**
- **Explore commentaries to expand your knowledge of context and culture.**
- **Be humble in presenting your case.**
- **Test boundaries by asking contextual questions that explore whether the people you are talking with think their reading of the passage only applies to their countries or ones like it, e.g., “Did that apply to Stalin?”**
- **If you are comfortable with it, ask to pray with them about it.**

PAUL’S INSTRUCTION TO “BE SUBJECT TO THE GOVERNING AUTHORITIES”

Romans 12–13

No passage is more commonly used to support states of all shapes and sizes than Romans 13, in which Paul is famously translated as saying, “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities.” It seems to explicitly condone submission to political authority, including the payment of taxes.

Yet Romans 13 was never intended as a stand-alone passage. Indeed, the whole structure of dividing the Bible into chapters and verses is a later imposition. In the original intent, the whole letter from Paul to the Romans was meant to be read as a cohesive text. So we need to understand this passage within the context of Paul’s broader argument. Immediately preceding the discussion of government is Paul’s exhortation to “not repay anyone evil for evil”; that is, not to take revenge but always to pursue peace by meeting injustice with love. And after the “submission” passage, in verse 8 and onwards, he swaps back to discussing the role of love in the lives of Christians. Why does Paul make such a massive detour in the middle of an argument about Christian living?



Remember that if Paul was speaking about governments then he was taking as his key example the reign of Emperor Nero, which killed and persecuted Christians. This was a government which Paul had openly defied on more than one occasion, which had imprisoned and beaten him multiple times, and which would do so again after he wrote this passage. Also remember that Paul makes no distinction regarding types of government, so whatever we take as his meaning must apply equally to Hitler, Stalin, Mao, George III, Herod, and any other tyrant as much as it does to the latest liberal-democratic leader in the USA, Australia, France, or Britain. I do not believe we can read Paul as condoning the actions of Hitler or Herod.

Perhaps, then, he was not speaking about government at all. The Greek terms that were translated as “governing authorities” and “taxes” are not in fact very clear; they can be interpreted in more than one way. Indeed, based on their uses elsewhere in Paul’s letters, there is a strong argument to be made that the words refer solely to honest or excellent judges, or perhaps even elders within the church community. Given that a discussion of moral or church authority would fit much more appropriately into Paul’s broader argument, this is probably a more appropriate interpretation of the original Greek text.

The actions of the early church would certainly back up this interpretation. Those who sought or retained positions in the Roman government or the military were generally excluded from the church community, and this was one of the reasons the community was so actively persecuted. It wasn’t until the time of Constantine, three full centuries after the birth of Christ, that conflict between Christians and the state subsided.

Government is violence, Christianity is meekness, non-resistance, love. And, therefore, government cannot be Christian, and a man who wishes to be a Christian must not serve government.

— Leo Tolstoy



Piers Paul Rubens, *The Tribute Money*, c. 1612.

THE TRIBUTE EPISODE

Matthew 22:15–22, Mark 12:13–17, Luke 20:20–26

Commonly known as the “render unto Caesar” passage, this passage is the most misunderstood of those commonly quoted by Christians in support of government. They claim that Jesus argued in favour of paying taxes, when the reality is almost precisely the opposite.

The Pharisees attempt to trap Jesus by asking him whether it is right to pay taxes to Rome. He asks them to produce the coin used to pay the tax, and with reference to it says, “Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” Jesus’s listeners are awed by the response.

First, this needs to be put into historical context. The surrounding area had been a hotbed of political revolt against Roman taxes for a number of decades; the Jews hated the Roman taxes and were so strongly opposed to them that it had often led to outright violence. These feelings were particularly enflamed around the festival of Passover because it celebrates Jewish emancipation from tyranny. This is precisely



when Jesus was speaking in Jerusalem. As a result of this, it is more than likely that there were Roman troops around when this event happened.

This helps to explain why the Pharisees thought the question was a trap. Jesus couldn't say, "Pay the tax," or the Jews would lose all respect for him, and he couldn't say, "Don't pay the tax," or the soldiers would execute him. If you think Jesus dodged this with a compromise, you're underestimating how inflammatory the topic was.

Second, you need to consider the importance of the coin. Why did Jesus ask to see the denarius before answering? There were various denarii in circulation in the period, but the most common had the likeness of Emperor Tiberius on it and an inscription that read "Son of the Divine." There is a deep irony in people suggesting that Jesus would emphasise any sort of positive message by holding up an idolatrous coin on which someone else claimed to be the son of God. The Jews considered it to be so unholy that few would have carried it, and it was thought profane to put it in the temple offering.

Third, the way in which the Pharisees asked the question required Jesus to answer with reference to the Torah. Jesus was not free-styling; he was exercising rabbinic authority to interpret scripture. So, does the Torah allow for a "compromise" solution of the sort that most Christians claim this is, giving secular authority to Caesar but retaining spiritual authority for God? In short, no, the Torah only allows for one Lord. Indeed, many modern commentators have decried the concept of the sacred/secular divide amongst today's Christians as a wholly modern invention that was not known to either the Hebrews or the apostolic church.

With those three key bits of information, we can begin to understand Jesus's true message. Jesus opposed the tax, but it was not yet time for him to die, and so he gave an answer that has to rank as one of history's greatest examples of genius: he spoke in a code such that the Jews heard one thing and the Romans who were listening heard another. The soldiers, ignorant of the Torah, heard Jesus supporting the tax — they had no context in which to understand his true meaning. The Jews, on the other hand, because they would have understood the blasphemous symbolism of the coin and the teachings of the Torah, heard something very different: "Give Caesar what he deserves: nothing. Give God what He deserves: everything."

It is a great irony when the tribute episode is used to justify paying taxes, because this only shows the allegiance of the person making the claim; they are part of the



empire, so they hear compromise. Those steeped in scripture, by contrast, hear an explosively radical manifesto of noncompliance. Such is the benefit of context and perspective.

For further reading, see Jesus's dismissive attitude towards Roman taxes in Matthew 17:24–27.

*He who surrenders himself without reservation
to the temporal claims of a nation, or a party,
or a class is rendering to Caesar that which,
of all things, most emphatically belongs
to God: himself.*

— C. S. Lewis

THE TEMPTATION

Matthew 4:1–11, Mark 1:12–13, Luke 4:1–13

The story of Christ's temptation in the desert is familiar to most Christians and many non-Christians. It is not, however, commonly cited as a passage with political ramifications. Despite this, a careful reading with a liberty-minded individual is likely to cause most pro-state Christians to stop and pause for thought.

Consider the temptation of power, in which Satan takes Jesus to a high place and offers him dominion over the kingdoms of the earth, if only He will worship Lucifer. In the version from Luke, Satan actually goes so far as to state that authority over the kingdoms of the earth “has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to.” Both Matthew and Luke record Jesus's response as being the same: that you should worship and serve the Lord God only. This is, of course, a reference back to the law of the Old Testament.

What everyone seems to miss about this passage is that Jesus does not question Satan's stated authority over the kingdoms of the earth. Whether you consider the



devil to be real or simply an allegory for man's evil, and whether you consider the temptation story to be fact or parable, the end result is the same: Jesus tacitly acknowledges the authority of Satan/evil over the governments of men.

I find this puts a whole new spin on discussions regarding our allegiances to secular authorities.

Jesus tacitly acknowledges the authority of Satan/evil over the governments of men.

ISRAEL ASKS FOR A KING

1 Samuel 8

While the New Testament is often misquoted, the Old Testament is more likely to be flat-out ignored. One passage that is rarely heard in pro-state churches is this one from Samuel, in which the Israelites ask for a king “like all the other nations have.” God does not respond positively.

Since the exodus from Egypt, where the pharaohs had held the Israelites in slavery, prophets and judges had undertaken most of the necessary leadership functions under a relatively decentralised, voluntary model. The last of these was Samuel. As he grew old, the people clamored for a king.

Prophets and judges had undertaken most of the necessary leadership functions under a relatively decentralised, voluntary model.

Consider why a king was important to them. First, they wished to be like the pagan tribes around them, who all had kings. Second, they wanted someone to lead them in battle, which suggests they had little love for peace. Neither of these is a reason that godly men could justify, which is why Samuel is “displeased” when he hears the people's request, and decides to take time to pray over the decision.

God responds in no uncertain terms. Speaking to Samuel, He says outright that by asking for a man to lead them “they have rejected me as their king.” This mirrors the many other teachings in the Bible regarding having only one master and makes it clear that a political master counts as a competitor to God. Sovereignty belongs to God, not man, and the making of law is the rightful province of God, not man.



The passage goes further than others asserting the sovereignty of God, however, by specifically explaining why other masters are so damaging. To use modern language, God clearly points out that any earthly master will conscript your sons, squander your resources, take you to war, tax you too heavily and for selfish ends, and even enslave you.

God allows people to “opt out,” or secede, from His kingdom and follow their own path.

The passage ends with God granting the people their wish despite all of this. It is interesting to see the difference in this regard between God and the earthly rulers He has vilified: God allows people to “opt out,” or secede, from His kingdom and follow their own path. Governments rarely offer the same degree of liberty.

JOTHAM’S FABLE

Judges 9:8–15

The events in 1 Samuel were not the first time some of the people of Israel had sought a king. For a short time a corrupt man named Abimalek had claimed the title with the support of the elders in a place called Sechem.

Gideon, who served as a judge for many years, has died and left behind 70 legitimate sons and one bastard. That bastard, Abimalek, has just killed 69 of his legitimate half brothers in pursuit of power in the region, despite Gideon’s having explicitly refused both the role of king of Israel and any hereditary right for his sons. Jotham is the only one of Gideon’s legitimate sons who has survived the mass murder, and before going into hiding he addresses the local people, who have supported his treacherous half brother’s power grab.

His short speech revolves around a fable which tells of the trees looking for a king amongst themselves. They ask the olive tree, the fig tree, and the vine to take the throne, but each one explains that it would rather be a productive member of society. Finally, the thornbush accepts the offer, but is far from pleasant about it, saying, “If you really want to anoint me king over you, come and take refuge in my shade; but if not, then let fire come out of the thornbush and consume the cedars of Lebanon!”



This fable is relatively straightforward. In context, it is clearly a denunciation of Israel's taking a king, particularly the bloodthirsty Abimalek. Some of the details make this fable particularly damning, however, so they are worth noting. First, it suggests what sort of person seeks political power: The thornbush is the most unproductive plant in the fable, the only one that does not create fruits to benefit others. It is also notably harsh and violent, something underscored by its immediate use of threats to uphold its newly established rule. Second, it offers "shade" to its loyal subjects, which is no doubt meant to be a metaphor for the security and peace it will bring. This is a particularly interesting analogy for the state, which claims much of its supposed legitimacy through offering security, because a thornbush does not and cannot provide much shade. Jotham is implying that the benefits of a king are illusory, while the dangers are very real.

While Jotham is never explicitly given prophetic authority, we later discover that both Abimalek and the people who supported him were punished by God just as Jotham said they would be, giving this fable significant weight.

CONCLUSION

This guide offers a starting point for those who would like to see the Christian church become a bastion of liberty in an oppressive and violent world. I hope you take from it some basic scriptural tools, some ideas for engaging with your community, and simple encouragement that you are not alone. But most of all I hope that





you build on it. Add your own studies of scripture, your own prayers, your own skills and qualities and ideas. Bring it into your own context, and turn thoughts into actions. Most importantly, remember to celebrate your successes and share them with the world, so we can learn from them in turn.



GRAEME BROOKS

Graeme is a (often-errant) disciple of Jesus who tends to worship with folks that use the label “Baptist.” Faith found him at 14, and since then he’s spent a lot of his time around churches doing the sort of youth work that managed to catch his attention back when he had more hair. Before becoming a real grown-up, he earned a Masters Degree in History and Politics at Oxford University (Trinity College), with a concentration on the history of political philosophy. To the great befuddlement of his tutors, he insisted on doing his undergraduate dissertation on anarchocapitalist ideology, and he wouldn’t stop dabbling in Austrian economics on the side.

A would-be agorist, Graeme begrudgingly pays his local overlords their regular levy by managing a boutique marketing communications agency. He is based in notorious tax haven the Isle of Man and takes particular delight in working with his financial-services clients to whisk as much money away from the UK’s tax coffers as legally possible. He also has a soft-spot for technology businesses and is working his socks off to support the burgeoning local cryptocurrency-based industry.

Graeme enjoys single malt Scotch, arguing with statisticians, and the Oxford comma.